



The School Psychologist's SURVIVAL GUIDE



- Useful forms, letters, and checklists
- Practical strategies
- Covers the latest assessments

REBECCA BRANSTETTER, Ph.D.

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More praise for The School Psychologist's Survival Guide

“Taking up where grad school leaves off, smart and savvy Rebecca Branstetter has written a practical, thorough, and truly helpful guide that will ease the nervousness of newbies and provide a revitalizing refresher for experienced school psychologists. An invaluable book for getting started, keeping up and ultimately finding satisfaction in this whirlwind of a career.”

—**Katherine A. Briccetti, Ph.D.**, school psychologist, Piedmont (California) Unified School District, author of *Blood Strangers: A Memoir*

“In the first book of its kind, Dr. Branstetter provides an invaluable resource for school psychologists both new and veteran. Her easy humor, reproducible charts and letters, and on-the-job personal experiences help translate classroom and textbook learning into real-life application.”

—**Aimee Koehler**, author of *Musings of an Urban School Psychologist* blog

“In *The School Psychologist's Survival Guide*, Dr. Branstetter provides a wealth of helpful hints in dealing with the breadth of activities that school psychologists engage in. From the practical to the pragmatic, these ideas and the summary tables will be useful for both new and experienced practitioners as well as for school psychology trainers and interns.”

—**Frank C. Worrell, Ph.D.**, director, School Psychology Program, University of California at Berkeley

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***The* SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST'S SURVIVAL GUIDE**

Rebecca Branstetter

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To my husband and greatest supporter, Steven Branstetter

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Thanks to my family—my parents, Ann and John, and my sister, Sammi, for your support and encouragement as well. Having educators in the family to consult with has certainly been to my advantage as I write about ways to support teachers and students.

I also want to thank my editor, Margie McAneny, for finding me among a sea of bloggers and supporting this book idea. I have enjoyed the process and appreciate your giving me creative license to write a book with a personal narrative. I hope that readers find the book more accessible as a result. I also want to acknowledge my fabulous peer reviewers—Danielle Nahas, Kelley Pursell, Lainie Sgouros, and Kate Perry. Your input was invaluable in making sure the book captured a range of experiences for school psychologists. Thanks so much!

I wouldn’t even be writing this acknowledgment section if it weren’t for my good friend and PR guru, Jennifer Parson. You encouraged me to start my blog and Facebook page in the first place and coached me every step of the way, and for that, I thank you.

About the Author

Rebecca Branstetter is both a school psychologist and a clinical psychologist in the San Francisco Bay Area. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, school psychology program with her doctorate in 2004. After graduating, she conducted her postdoctoral work at the University of California, San Francisco Autism Clinic. She has worked as a school psychologist in both the San Francisco and Oakland school districts for the past ten years. She is the founder of Grow Assessment and Counseling Services, a private practice agency that works with children and families in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Rebecca also writes the blog Notes from the School Psychologist and is the editor of *The Teachable Moment: Seizing the Instants When Children Learn* (Kaplan, 2010), an anthology about reaching the difficult-to-reach child.

Preface

When I started my career as a school psychologist ten years ago, I was ridiculously unprepared for the challenges that lay ahead of me. Armed only with optimism, pluck, and a few years of practicum and coursework, I thought I was ready to work in a large urban school district. I fancied myself the school psychologist version of Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*, changing the world, one student at a time. Little did I know, there were on-the-job skills I didn't have, and I learned something new every ten minutes. I was fortunate to have a fantastic supervisor, Minoo Shah, who guided me through my traumatic first few years, when I made mistake after mistake. I felt for school psychologists who did not have the great mentoring I did. I couldn't believe all the things I was never taught in graduate school. This is not my alma mater's fault: there are some things you just have to learn when you are on the job for the first time.

One thing no one ever told me going into this profession was that it could be isolating. Even though I am surrounded by educators, children, and parents every day, I only get to see my school psychologist colleagues once a month at staff meetings. The support and input you receive from your colleagues is instrumental in preventing burnout and becoming a better practitioner. So in 2007, I began my blog, Notes from the School Psychologist (www.studentsgrow.blogspot.com), in an effort to connect with other school psychologists and share knowledge I wish I had starting out. Whether I was talking about how to deal with nasty advocates at meetings or giving advice about how not to accidentally form a gang in group therapy, I felt good about helping other school psychologists learn from

my mistakes. Little did I know, my blog and subsequent Facebook page for the blog would connect me to colleagues across the country, all of whom have great information to share, insights to learn from, and emotional support I didn't even know I needed. I love hearing from colleagues about how to improve our skills, our profession, and our experience in day-to-day life as school psychologists.

I began to receive e-mails asking me to recommend a resource for school psychologists to learn the on-the-job skills needed to be successful. I knew of no such resource—one that provided practical, real-world advice about how to be an effective school psychologist. That is how this book came to be. I hope you find it useful, entertaining, and practical. I have enjoyed consulting with many of you to make sure the book captures the wide range of experiences we have in this profession. Thank you all for your input, and enjoy!

Introduction

School psychologists are professionals who provide mental health and educational services within school districts, typically for students with special needs. School psychology was named one of the top twenty careers in 2009 by *U.S. News and World Report*, and represents a growing field. The U.S. Department of Labor cites employment opportunities in school psychology at both the specialist and doctoral levels as among the best across all fields of psychology.

Much has been written about the technical aspects of performing the job of a school psychologist, such as theories of learning, principles of cognitive assessment, and counseling theory. However, there is little so far about the nuts-and-bolts practical side of the profession—what school psychologists experience once they are in the field. There is a growing need for a survival guide for navigating the day-to-day challenges of working in the bureaucracy of a school district, managing large caseloads, dealing with legal and ethical challenges on the job, and crisis management. There is a dearth of materials for school psychologists with regard to how to bridge the theories learned in graduate school and the practical challenges experienced during the workday.

The purpose of *The School Psychologist's Survival Guide* is to bridge that gap between research and reality. School psychologists just entering the field are often lacking the day-to-day practical advice they need to survive in the job, and the theories they learned in graduate school about how to deliver high-quality services in the schools often do not match the reality of the job. This guide will give new school psychologists ready-to-use tools they need to streamline

their work flow and overcome the challenges they face every day. School psychologists who have already been working in the field will also profit from fresh ideas about how to improve their practice and prevent burnout.

The School Psychologist's Survival Guide takes on the top challenges school psychologists face every day and provides real-world solutions. Instead of a dry textbook about the profession and a school psychologist's job duties, it brings to life how to bridge the gap between best practices according to the research, and the realities of working in school district bureaucracies, often with limited resources. The purpose is to give new school psychologists a go-to resource with ready-to-use strategies and time-saving reproducible materials they can use every day.

Although I've taken great care to represent school psychologists' experiences across the country, there are differences in how laws and policies are interpreted by states, districts, and school sites. You will want to stay current with your local and state guidelines and laws, and consult with your supervisors and site staff about the application of these hands-on tools and strategies in your local setting.

This guide begins with a big-picture overview of the job of a school psychologist, including the many roles that we play on a daily basis. Chapters Two and Three focus on the day-to-day logistical challenges that we face—from heavy caseloads to working in janitors' closets to battling with unnecessary paperwork—and how to deal with them. The subsequent chapters are organized by the roles that school psychologists frequently assume in the schools. These chapters do not necessarily need to be read sequentially, as school psychologists' jobs are often different depending on the particular schools to which they are assigned. Chapters Four through Seven detail ways to become more efficient in

working with students experiencing academic and behavioral challenges. Chapter Four discusses practical ways to become involved in prevention and early intervention; Chapter Five outlines strategies for being effective in schools implementing a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework. Chapters Six and Seven highlight how to be more efficient in the special education referral and assessment process and how to be an effective presenter at Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings.

In addition to providing advice and resources for the assessment and intervention process, this guide describes nuts-and-bolts techniques for being an effective consultant (Chapter Eight) and providing counseling services (Chapters Nine through Eleven). Specific strategies as well as ready-to-use forms are available in these chapters, which discuss individual counseling (Chapter Nine), group counseling (Chapter Ten), and crisis counseling (Chapter Eleven). The guide concludes with an important chapter on preventing burnout and increasing job satisfaction (Chapter Twelve).

Overall, *The School Psychologist's Survival Guide* aims to help new and veteran school psychologists become more efficient and effective service providers, improve and hone their skills in the multitude of roles they assume in the schools, and increase their job satisfaction. With practical ready-to-use forms and time-saving suggestions, this guide will be your go-to resource for dealing with the situations that were never covered in graduate school. Sprinkled throughout the guide is a touch of school psychologist humor, which is of course a necessary ingredient for survival in this profession!

chapter 1

WEARING MANY HATS: The Roles of the School Psychologist

I've been told that you should be able to explain your career to a stranger in the time it takes to ride an elevator for a few floors. I have been working on my school psychologist "elevator speech" for years now, and I think I need to be in a high-rise elevator in order to fully explain my duties. That is because school psychologists may be responsible for many different tasks, and their roles vary considerably from school to school, district to district, and state to state. I have finally settled on saying, "School psychologists are like if a teacher and a psychologist had a baby. We do interventions to prevent school failure, test struggling students to uncover reasons for learning problems, and provide them with appropriate interventions. Those interventions could involve special education services, counseling, or consulting with teachers and parents to help students with their areas of need." Then, inevitably, someone responds with, "Oh, so you're a counselor?" Sigh. It really is a difficult profession to explain.

In general, school psychologists have four main "hats" they may wear in the schools: assessor, consultant, prevention and intervention specialist, and counselor. Each graduate school program places different emphases on these roles, but once you are working in the schools, you are often expected to fulfill many, if not all, of these roles in some capacity. There will also be unofficial roles in your job as well, depending on your school sites. These could range from supervising traffic during afternoon dismissal to

serving on administrative committees. This chapter outlines the four most likely roles of the school psychologist and helps you identify chapters in this guide that will help you improve your skills and bolster your effectiveness in each role.

ASSESSMENT

Assessing students is often seen as the primary role of the school psychologist, though this varies among districts and schools. Historically, school psychologists came on the scene in 1975 as a part of the first special education law, PL94-142. Under this law, school psychologists were identified as the professionals responsible for testing students to evaluate their school functioning related to special education disability criteria. Even now, for many school psychologists, assessment of students suspected of having disabilities and of those students already in special education continues to be the primary role in many districts.

In graduate school, the first courses I completed were in psychoeducational assessment, which covered the history of tests and how to administer them, and in applied statistics, which covered in part how to interpret the information that the test administrations produced. It was exciting learning all the new tools, practicing administering IQ tests (mostly on the children of professors and friends), and perfecting the art of the standardized assessment. I remember borrowing my first testing kit, then housed in a 1980s-style briefcase that weighed almost as much as I did. I felt so fancy clicking it open and administering the tests with my brand-new stopwatch that I had rigged to be nearly unnoticeable by removing its beeper. It was so exciting.

Ten years later, the luster and excitement of administering these tests has faded, my iPhone has replaced my cute little timer, I've ditched the circa 1982 briefcase, and I've administered IQ tests so many times that I have them memorized. I would estimate that I have given the same test about seven hundred times since becoming a school psychologist. Although this has the potential to become extraordinarily boring, one thing that keeps it fresh is the challenge of figuring out how to help a child learn more easily and efficiently. Each child is like a puzzle, and each test we give is a piece of the puzzle in understanding how the child learns best and what gets in the way of learning. No two children approach testing the same way. You can learn a lot about kids just from their reactions to the words, "Today we are going to do a series of activities to see how you learn best!" From "Go away, I'm not special ed!" to "Yay! Let's go!" you can learn a lot about students that the numbers won't be able to tell you. There are many tricks of the trade for making the evaluation process meaningful, in terms of both the numbers you get and of the qualitative observations of how kids tackle problems. Chapter Six outlines how to gain information from your assessments that is useful for helping students, their parents, and their teachers.

Your testing caseload will vary tremendously according to the size of your school district, the area of the country in which you are employed, the type of setting in which you work (rural, suburban, or urban), and the policies of each school district regarding your responsibilities in general education (intervention and prevention) and special education. As a school psychologist, you are often assigned both new referrals (often called "initials") and legally mandated three-year assessments (often called "triennials" or "reevaluations"). Each of these assessments has its own legal timeline for completion, which is an added pressure

for a school psychologist. The first year I was employed by a large urban school district, I was assigned three schools of approximately five hundred students each. The list of mandatory three-year evaluations I had to complete that year numbered about seventy-five. In addition, I was employed only three days per week! I couldn't fathom how I would get through it all within the timelines, and many of the cases were already overdue when I walked in the door my first day. Even without any new referrals, I felt that my caseload was almost impossible if I wanted to do a thorough job with each student.

I learned more about the dramatic differences in caseloads through my blog, Notes from the School Psychologist (www.studentsgrow.blogspot.com). I asked the online community of school psychologists who follow the blog to report their testing caseloads on the blog's Facebook page. The reported yearly caseloads for full-time psychologists ranged from 4 to 120, with the median at about 60. One of the main factors that determined caseload was whether or not the district had adopted the Response to Intervention (RtI) method of identifying and responding to learning difficulties, which heavily emphasizes prevention and early intervention. Regardless of your caseload and whether or not your school has adopted RtI, in Chapters Four and Five you will learn more about how to infuse a preventive model of intervention into your daily work to reduce the amount of time you spend doing individual assessments.

Another key factor in determining caseload is school placement. School psychologists at the elementary level tend to have more initial evaluations, and school psychologists at middle and high schools tend to have more triennial reevaluations. Psychologists assigned to preschool diagnostic centers, bilingual assessment teams, charter school teams, and nonpublic school teams tend to have the